Anicius Olybrius

(11 July 472 – 2 November 472)

SOURCES

Most of the sources that mention the emperor Anicius Olybrius deal with his life before he became emperor. Summaries of his brief reign, during which scarcely any of his activities are known, are limited primarily to brief notices of his accession and death. The best of the bare-bones accounts of his life are provided by the *Fasti vindobonenses priores* and John of Antioch.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY HISTORY

Olybrius probably was a scion of the family of Anicius Hermogenianus Olybrius, consul in 395, whose wife was named Anicia Juliana; both, therefore, were members of the powerful Anician family of Italy. *Circa* 454 Olybrius married Placidia, the younger daughter of **Valentinian III** and **Licinia Eudoxia**, and the sister of Eudocia. The marriage may reflect an effort by **Valentinian III** to solidify an alliance with the Italian senatorial aristocracy as part of his effort to assert his own authority vis-á-vis that of powerful generals such as Fl. Aëtius. **Valentinian's** murder of Aëtius in 454, however, was followed by his own assassination in March of 455, and the seizure of the throne by **Petronius Maximus**.

Two months later the Vandals captured and sacked Rome. The Byzantine chronicler Malalas reported,

"Gaiseric came suddenly to Rome with his forces and captured the city... He even led away as captives surviving senators, along with their wives; along with them he also carried off to Carthage in Africa the empress Eudoxia, who had summoned him, her daughter Placidia, the wife of the patrician Olybrius, who then was staying at Constantinople, and even the maiden Eudocia. After he had returned, Gaiseric gave the younger Eudocia, a maiden, the daughter of the empress Eudoxia, to his son Huneric in marriage, and he held them both, the mother and the daughter, in great honor" (*Chron*. 366).

Olybrius, therefore, escaped the sack, but suffered the distress of seeing his wife carried off to Carthage.

The little that is known about Olybrius' personal concerns suggests that he had a great interest in religion. During his stay in Constantinople, for example, he visited Daniel the Stylite, who foretold **Eudoxia's** return from captivity in Africa. And it may have been at this time that he wrote to his wife's grandmother, the eastern empress **Eudocia**, at Jerusalem advising her to forsake Eutychianism.

After the death of the western emperor **Majorian** in 461, Gaiseric supported Olybrius as a candidate for the western throne. The contemporary Byzantine historian Priscus noted,

"Gaiseric, although many embassies had been sent to him at different times, did not dismiss the women until he had betrothed the elder daughter of Valentinian (Eudocia was her name) to his son Huneric. Then he sent back Eudoxia, the daughter of Theodosius II, with Placidia, her other daughter, whom Olybrius had married. Gaiseric did not cease from ravaging Italy and Sicily, but pillaged them the more, desiring that, after Majorian, Olybrius would be emperor of the Romans of the west by reason of his kinship by marriage" (*fr.*29: Gordon trans., p.118).

John of Antioch provides some additional information:

"Gaiseric ravaged the lands of Italy wanting Olybrius to be emperor of the west because of his relationship by marriage. He did not make the obvious pretext for the war the fact that Olybrius had not become the ruler of the west, but rather that he had not been given the property of Valentinian and Aëtius. He demanded this partly in the name of Eudocia, whom his son had married, and partly because Gaudentius, Aëtius' son, was living with him" (*fr.*204: Gordon trans., pp.119-120)

Gaiseric's demands, of course, came to nought, for **Libius Severus (461-465)** was named western emperor by the barbarian general Ricimer.

The return of the imperial women was also reported by Malalas, who mistakenly placed it during the reign of Marcian:

"During his reign the empresses Eudoxia and Placidia returned to their families at Constantinople, and Olybrius once again had for himself his wife Placidia, who bore Juliana to him at Constantinople"(*Chron*. 368).

Olybrius and Placidia, therefore, remained in the east with their daughter Anicia Juliana, who would have been born in the mod 460s. In 464, he was named *consul posterior* with Fl. Rusticus. Both consuls were appointed by the eastern emperor **Leo**, given that **Leo** did not recognize **Severus**, and it may be that Olybrius, as an Italian, filled the "western" slot. Olybrius' religious interests continued to manifest themselves as he and Placidia renovated the church of St. Euphemia at Constantinople, which had been founded by Placidia's mother **Eudoxia.**

Olybrius' name appears again after the death of **Severus** in 465, when Gaiseric once again supported him as a candidate for the western throne. The sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius reported,

"Now, before this time Leo had already appointed and sent Anthemius as emperor of the west, a man of the senate of great wealth and high birth, in order that he might assist him in the Vandalic war. And yet Gaiseric kept asking and earnestly entreating that the imperial power be given to Olybrius, who was married to Placidia, the daughter of Valentinian, and on account of his relationship well-disposed toward him, and when he failed in this he was still more angry and kept plundering the whole land of the emperor"(*Bellum Vandalicum* 6.9: Dewing trans, p.57).

ACCESSION

Olybrius' name came up again in an imperial context in 472, when he was sent by **Leo** to attempt to arbitrate in the civil war between the western emperor **Anthemius** and the barbarian general Ricimer. According to Malalas,

"While this same Leo was ruling, the Roman emperor Anthemius met his end. He was threatened with the serious enmity of his son-in-law Ricimer, who, being a Goth, caused Anthemius to fear for his safety. Therefore, seeking asylum in the church of St. Peter, he took refuge pretending that he was ill. Meanwhile, when the emperor Leo learned what was happening, he sent to Rome Olybrius, a Roman patrician, after he and Rusticus had served in the consulate [in 464], so that, as a representative of the Roman senate, he might quell the hostilities that existed between Anthemius and his son- in-law Ricimer. In addition, Leo enjoined upon him in his directive that, after he had reconciled Anthemius and Ricimer, he should depart from Rome and go to the king of Africa, the Vandal Gaiseric, with whom Leo did not doubt that he had great influence because the sister of Olybrius' wife Placidia had married his son, and persuade him to reconcile himself with him [Leo]. The emperor Leo, however, suspected that Olybrius favored Gaiseric and would secretly take his side. He therefore feared for his own sake, lest Olybrius, who had a tie of marriage with Gaiseric, would betray Constantinople to Gaiseric if Gaiseric declared war upon him. Therefore, after Olybrius had departed for Rome, having left his daughter and his wife Placidia at Constantinople, the most sacred emperor Leo gave a message to a subordinate of the Master of Offices to be delivered to Anthemius, emperor of the Romans, in these words: "I have removed," he said, "Aspar and Ardaburius from this world, so that no one who might oppose me would survive. But you also must kill your son-in-law Ricimer, lest there be anyone who might betray you. Moreover, I also have sent the patrician Olybrius to you; I wish you to kill him, so that you might reign, ruling rather than serving others." Furthermore, Ricimer had placed at Portus [Ostia] and the individual ports of Rome a Gothic guard, nor was entry permitted to anyone before he had indicated to Ricimer what his mission was. Therefore, when Modestus the *magistrianus*, who had been sent by Leo to Anthemius, came to Rome he was immediatedly searched and the letters of the emperor, sent from Leo to Anthemius, were taken from him and handed over to Ricimer, who showed them to Olybrius. Ricimer immediately summoned Gundobad, the son of his sister, from Gaul, where he was Master of Soldiers, who, having killed the emperor Anthemius in the very church of St. Peter the Apostle, where he had taken refuge, then returned to Gaul. Then Ricimer established Olybrius as emperor at Rome, with the approval of the senate, where, after he had reigned for a few months, he encountered death and succumbed to fate" (*Chron*. 373-375).

From a political perspective, Ricimer had made a good choice. Olybrius not only would have been acceptable to the Roman Senate on the grounds of his aristocratic heritage, but he also would have provided a candidate much more palatable than the Greek **Anthemius**.

Other sources, however, indicate that Ricimer proclaimed Olybrius emperor, in opposition to **Anthemius**, well before the latter's death, probably in April, 472. For example, John of Antioch recounts,

"Anthemius was living in the palace. Ricimer cut off the districts by the Tiber and afflicted those inside with hunger. Hence, when there was an engagement with them, a great part of Anthemius' faction fell. Ricimer overwhelmed the rest by treachery and appointed Olybrius emperor. Civil war had then afflicted Rome for five whole months, until those around Anthemius gave in to the barbarians and left their ruler defenseless. He mingled with those begging alms and went among the suppliants of the martyr Chrysogonus [now Santa Maria in Trastevere]. There he was beheaded by Gundobad, Ricimer's nephew, after reigning five years, three months, and eighteen days." (*fr.*209.1-2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123)

And the *Fasti vindobonenses priores* likewise reported, "During this consulate a civil war occurred at Rome between the emperor Anthemius, and the emperor Olybrius was proclaimed at Rome, and the emperor Anthemius was killed on 11 July: ("*his cons. bellum civile gestum est Romae inter Anthemius imperatorem et Ricimere patricio, et levatus est imp. Olybrius Romae, et occisus est imp. Anthemius V idus Iulias*": no.606. *s.a.* 472). Cassiodorus not only put Olybrius' accession before **Anthemius'** death, but also blamed

Ricimer, not Gundobad: "During this consulate, the patrician Ricimer, having made Olybrius emperor at Rome, after a short battle in the city killed Anthemius contrary to reverence for the emperor and the claims of marriage..." ("*His conss. patricius Ricimer Romae facto imperatore Olybrio Anthemium contra reverentiam principis et ius adfinitatis cum brevi clade civitatis extinguit...*": 1293, *s.a.*472).

Two eastern sources, however, not only suggest that **Anthemius** was killed by Ricimer, but also limit their discussions of Olybrius' reign to bare notices of his accession and death. Count Marcellinus noted, "The emperor Anthemius was killed at Rome by his son-in-law Ricimer, and Olybrius, having been put into his place, died in the seventh month of his rule" ("*Anthemius imperator Romae a Recimero genero suo occiditur. loco eius Olybrius substitutus septimo mense imperii sui vita defunctus est*": *Chron*. s.a.472). And Procopius reported, "Now Anthemius, the emperor of the west, died at the hand of his son-in-law Ricimer, and Olybrius, succeeding to the throne, suffered the same fate a short time afterward" (*Bellum Vandalicum* 7.1: Dewing trans., p.65). It remains to be seen, therefore, whether or not Olybrius was named emperor before the death of **Anthemius**.

REIGN

Scarcely anything of consequence is known to have occurred during Olybrius' brief reign. The most significant events to appear in the sources are the death of Ricimer and the elevation of Gundobad to the position of Patrician and Master of Soldiers. John of Antioch noted, "After Olybrius had become ruler over the Romans in this way, Ricimer departed life within thirty days [9 August], after vomiting much blood" (*fr.*209.2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123). Cassiodorus gave Ricimer a few more days of life: "He did not enjoy himself long after the perpetration of this crime, and he died after forty days [19 August]" ("*qui non diutius peracto scelere gloriatus post XL dies defunctus est*": *Chron*. 1293, s.a.472). The *Fasti vindobonenses priores* (no.607) establish the date of Ricimer's death more precisely: "And Ricimer died on 18 August" ("*et defunctus est Ricimer XV kl. Septemb.*").

The same source reports, "In this year Gundobad was appointed Patrician by the emperor Olybrius" ("*eo anno Gundobadus patricius factus ab Olybrio imp*." *Fast. vind. prior.*608). And Paul the Deacon likewise notes, "After the death of Ricimer, the emperor Olybrius appointed as Patrician Ricimer's nephew Gundobad" ("*mortuo Ricimere Olibrius imperator Gundibarum eius nepotem patricium effecit*": *Historia Roman*a 15.5).

The only indication of any policies of Olybrius is found on his coinage (see Kent, *RIC*), which was struck only in gold, at Rome and Milan. Milan struck only tremisses of the usual cross in wreath type. But the Roman solidi and tremisses broke with tradition. In the past, solidi had had legends such as *SALVS REIPUBLICAE* ("Salvation of the Republic") and *VICTORIA AVGGG* ("Victory of the Emperors"), and tremisses bore on the reverse a simple cross within a wreath without any legend. The solidi and tremisses of Olybrius struck at Rome, however, both bore a cross, which on the tremisses was sometimes jeweled, and the innovative legend *SALVS MUNDI* ("Salvation of the World"). This design is so novel that it must have been introduced at the specific command of Olybrius himself, and it surely is a reflection of his pious preoccupation with religious matters.

DEATH

Olybrius was the shortest lived of all the "shadow" emperors. John of Antioch reports,

"Olybrius survived only thirteen days after [Ricimer's death] and then, attacked by dropsy, he died, having been reckoned among the emperors for six months. Gundobad, Ricimer's nephew, succeeded to Ricimer's position and raised Glycerius, who had held the office of Count of the Domestics, to the throne" (*fr.* 209.2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123)

Other writers provide brief notices of Olybrius' death: Cassiodorus reported, "Olybrius departed from this life in the seventh month of his reign" ("*Olybrius autem VII imperii mense vitam peregit*": *Chron*. 1293); Ennodius noted, "At the very beginning of his reign he lived his last day" ("*in ipsis exordiis diem clausit extremum*": *Vita Epiphanii* 350); the *Paschale campanum* provided one specific date: "And Olybrius died on 2 November" ("*et Olybrius moritur IIII non. Novemb.*"); and the *Fasti vindobonenses priores* (no.609) provided another, "And the emperor Olybrius died at Rome on 22 October" ("*et defunctus est imp. Olybrius Romae X kl. Novemb*.").

These reports allow one to resolve the question of the timing of Olybrius' accession. Olybrius died either on 28 October (*Fast.vind.prior.*) or 2 November (*Paschale campanum*), in either the sixth (John of Antioch) or seventh (Cassiodorus, Marcellinus) month of his rule. This would put his accession in April, or early May at the very latest. But **Anthemius** was killed on 11 July. Olybrius, therefore, was named emperor by Ricimer a good two months or more before the death of **Anthemius**.

EPILOGUE

Olybrius provided the last connection in either east or west to the dynasty of Valentinian and Theodosius. His reign also marked another failed attempt at a Romano- barbarian rapprochement: **Avitus** and **Majorian** had been ultimately unsuccessful with the Visigoths, and now Olybrius' ties to the Vandals came to nought. Personally, Olybrius seems to have been an example par excellence of a "puppet" emperor, variously serving the needs of Gaiseric, **Leo**, and Ricimer. His personal interests seem to have been religious, and it is in that realm that his fleeting reign had any impact at all.
For Procopius, moreover, the emperors of this period were so insignificant that he confused **Nepos** with Olybrius, stating, after discussing Anthemius,

"And another emperor, Nepos, upon taking over the empire and living to enjoy it only a few days, died of disease, and Glycerius after him entered into this office and suffered a similar fate. And after him Augustus assumed the imperial power. There were, moreover, still other emperors in the west before this time, but although I know their names well, I shall make no mention of them whatsoever. For it so fell out that they lived only a short time after attaining the office, and as a result of this accomplished nothing worthy of mention..." (*Bellum Vandalicum* 7.15-17: Dewing trans., p.69)

A fitting epitaph for most of the western emperors of this period.

A legacy of Olybrius' ties to the Vandals surfaced in 478. Malchus reported,

"Ambassadors came to Byzantium from Carthage, under the leadership of Alexander, the guardian of Olybrius' wife [sc. Placidia]. He formerly had been sent there by Zeno with the agreement of Placidia herself. The ambassadors said that Huneric had honestly set himself up as a friend of the emperor, and so loved all things Roman that he renounced everything that he had formerly claimed from the public revenues and also the other moneys that Leo had earlier seized from his wife [sc. Eudocia]... He gave thanks that the emperor had honored the wife of Olybrius..." (*fr.* 13: Gordon trans. p.125)

Olybrius' wife and daughter, Placidia and Anicia Juliana, remained in Constantinople and long outlived him. Juliana, who held the title "Patricia", presumably a result of her imperial ties, went on to have an illustrious career of her own. In 478, **Zeno** proposed that she marry Theodoric the Ostrogoth, a move, which if consummated, could have led to an imperial revival in the west. She eventually married Fl. Areobindus Dagalaiphus Areobindus, the great-grandson of the barbarian general Aspar, who served as Master of Soldiers in his own right ca.503-505 and consul in 506. Their son, also named Olybrius, became consul in 491, and a granddaughter was named Proba. Juliana inherited her father's devotion to religion, supporting the Chalcedonian party against the emperor **Anastasius** (491-518). Like her parents, she refurbished the family church of St. Euphemia. She also enlarged the church of St. Polyeucta, which had been founded by her great-grandmother, the empress **Eudocia**, and in the mid-520s she built a new church in honor of Mary, "the Mother of God." Her most well-known surviving legacy is a sixth- century manuscript of Dioscorides, made to her order, which contains her portrait. She died ca.527/528.

Finally, one could not conclude a discussion of this ephemeral emperor without mentioning that in 1711 Olybrius served as the protagonist of the opera "Flavio Anicio Olibrio" by Niccol• Antonia Porpora (1686-1766).

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